

BEING ALIVE IN THE ABSURD: REFLECTION ON CAMUS' ZEST FOR LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus, Nobel Laureate and famous French author and essayist, proposed the Philosophy of Absurd through his essay '*The Myth of Sisyphus*'. His depiction of Meursault, the absurd hero of his novel '*The Stranger*' was a closer portrayal of his stance on this idea. Though Camus advocated the meaninglessness of existence through absurd, he also emphasized that the life of a man is not absurd. He was not a trained philosopher still his ideas shook people in the bleak days of Second World War. He opined that since there was no meaning whatsoever of existence; the life must be lived all the more in awareness and with revolt, passion and freedom. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that Camus was a passionate enthusiast for living in consciousness of absurd.

KEYWORDS: Absurd, Life, Meaning, Existence, Happy, God

INTRODUCTION

Often called an Existential Philosopher, Camus, in his life time, actively disapproved of the title conferred upon him. Though he probed into the meaning of life in absence of a reason of existence, he maintained an apparent distance from the ideologies proposed by both theist and atheist Existential philosophers, even while questioning their beliefs and providing his own justifications on his stand. However, one cannot navigate through the study of Existentialism without understanding Camus' opinion which he proposed through 'Absurd'. Though he concludes that "*meaning of life is the most urgent of questions*" (Camus 2000, p.12), but unlike other Existential philosophers, Camus doesn't try to find a meaning of life or of Existence in some form of transcendence. Instead, he accepts the absurdity of life and asserts the actions which must be taken in its wake to make the most of this inescapable notion of human exile. Still further, he accentuates the notion of living life fully in the awareness of absurd. To him it is living itself despite the knowledge of futility of existence that offers a meaning.

Camus' struggle, attributed to his depression due to suffering from tuberculosis early in life and the aftermath of World War II, was a result of the failure of transcendentalism, religious systems, practical Marxism and humanism too in the wake of rising tyranny in Europe. During his writing career, he navigated from 'absurd' to 'rebel' but his focus upon 'living' did not deter. Whereas Camus' 'absurd' is related to suicide, his 'rebel' focuses on murder; the focus of writer later being shifted from the relation of Universe with a man to man's relation with other men in the society. In other words, his focus shifted to finding harmony and solidarity between humans as he matured as a writer but he always addressed that in relation to absurd. In the essay '*In Memoriam*', Nicola Chiaromonte remembers Camus' 1946 speech to students of Columbia University, where he spoke about the world which was left to humans after the World Wars and Hitler:

“Another thing we have learned is that we cannot accept any optimistic conception of existence, any happy ending whatsoever. But if we believe that optimism is silly, we also know that pessimism about the action of man among his fellows is cowardly.” (Bree, 1962, p.15)

His denial, of optimistic conception of existence i.e. a meaning of existence, and a happy ending i.e. an afterlife, further reinforces his absurd stance while at the same time negating renunciation or inaction and emphasizing solidarity, in other words, living meaningfully in a meaningless world.

Being born a poor French Algerian, his inheritance included a belief in simple pagan joy along with atheism where the only Gods he came to believe in were the Algerian Sun, sea and nature. It was also owing to his Mediterranean heritage that he believed in living in present happiness without a hope for after or another life. His awareness of death amidst the grandeur of life was what was responsible for his belief in ‘life’ all the more. It was through his works *“The Stranger”* and *“The Myth of Sisyphus”* that he first contemplated upon this awareness resulting in the feeling of absurd.

DISCUSSIONS

According to him, to a man for whom the Universe becomes *“suddenly divested of illusions and light”* (Camus, 2000, p.13), there rises a despair, which leads him to question the ‘why’ of existence. Such a man feels like *“an alien, a stranger”* (p.13) in this inexplicable World. This feeling of the deprivation of a *“memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land”* (p.13) is the absurdity that the man faces. It is this divorce between him and his life that raises the feelings of absurdity of existence. Then he asks what could be the justification of such a feeling. If nothing offers meaning, can one deduce that life shouldn’t be lived at all? That it is better to make life come to an end by killing oneself? He then questions if ‘suicide’ justifies absurd or should one give in to ‘hope’ after life.

In contradiction to the general perception, of depression to be associated with his absurd, Camus affirms the ‘love’ of life in this meaningless World. Even if the World is absurd, the life of humans, in itself, is not absurd. It has meaning. But it doesn’t lie in trying to find a meaning in life, nor does it lie in abandoning life, but rather in acquiring freedom from the idea that life has a purpose. However, it is not understood very clearly. There is confusion in that when it is heard that there is no meaning in life, people believe that it *“necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living”* (p.15). Conversely, this is not what Camus proposes. Instead, he suggests confronting the absurd without considering ‘suicide’ or giving in to a ‘hope’ of eternal life. The confusion, hence, should be kept aside while pondering over the subject of absurdity. When Camus speaks of consciousness of absurdity and living in its awareness, he implies:

“.....a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation) and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared with immature unrest).” (p.34)

According to Camus, *“the point is to live”* (p.63) and that *“life will be lived all the more better in the knowledge that it has no meaning”* (p.53). It is lived fully in the consciousness of absurd. In the knowledge of there being no meaning, only does a man acquire true freedom. A man who is dedicated to finding a purpose or meaning in life eventually becomes *“the slave of liberty”* (p.57) but the absurd man is free and hence can live a better life. To negate this consciousness is to negate the absurd. Hence suicide, individual or philosophical, is not an answer to absurd. Physical suicide is, according to him:

"...like the leap is its acceptance at extreme.....In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death.....The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death."(p.54)

"Living is keeping the absurd alive" (p.53) i.e. Living is the constant confrontation between man and meaninglessness; living is a constant revolt so that absurd doesn't die. Like the man condemned to death, who lives between "yes" and "no" and *"remains on the dizzying crest"*(p.50) which makes the absurd leap recognizable, the absurd man too knows that he is condemned to death and hence lives fully in present, free without the hope of eternal freedom. Meursault in *"The Stranger"* by Camus was the exact depiction of a "man condemned to death". He lived in the routine practicality of day to day life because that made him happy but being sentenced to death, he became aware of the absurd and further realized that in his death he will be equal to all other men who will eventually share the same fate as his. That made him happy and he looked forward to his guillotine being conscious and more alive.

Camus stresses that in his negation (of hope) only, can an absurd man live a life of true happiness, a life without consolation, fear or failure. The collection of essays *"Betwixt and Between"* which was first published in 1937 before the publication of *"The Myth of Sisyphus"* and *"The Stranger"*, is Camus' first attempt at considering both the "yes" and "no" of life. He accepts the duality of existence i.e. a deep love of life in the face of despair or fear of death. It is this tension *"between the joy of living and fear of death"* (Cruickshank, 1960, p.24) that he places his absurd at. In the essay "Irony" from the collection, he asserts this dualism through the young man observing the old and realizing:

"Death for all of us, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us."
(Camus, 1967, p.22)

The warmth of sun brings the joy in 'living' despite death being inevitable. Similarly, in other essays in this collection, Camus maintains that the two sides i.e. the wrong and right are indispensable to each other.

By philosophical suicide, Camus refers to the ideas proposed by Existential philosophers who tried to understand absurd in their own ways but unable to get at a solution, gave into what they found impossible to define. Existentialism in itself, he believes, is "philosophical suicide" because an existentialist first says "absurd" and then "God". He quotes philosophers like Jasper, Chestov and Kierkegaard and says that they *"without exception suggests escape"* (Camus, 2000, p.35). Whereas Jasper proposes the existence which cannot be defined as *"unthinkable unity of the general"* (p.36) and the *"inability to understand"* (p.36) as the existence which illuminates everything, Chestov names the fundamental absurdity by saying: *"This is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories"* (p.37). Kierkegaard calls for the *"third sacrifice required by Ignatius Loyola, the one in which God most rejoices – The sacrifice of the intellect"* (p.40). He says, *"In his failure, the believer finds his triumph"* (p.40).

Camus doesn't agree with these philosophers. For him this giving up is Philosophical suicide. He does not believe in Jasper's idea of Transcendence. In response to Chestov, he says *"To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason"* (p.38). He chooses 'despair' instead of Kierkegaard's frantic adherence. He says *"I want everything to be explained to me or nothing"* (p.31).

Camus believes *"there is not love of life without despair about life"* (Camus, 1967, p. 43) and *"what counts is not the best living but the most living"* (Camus, 2000, p.59). It is necessary to come face to face with the absurd through

confrontation, to accept it and to live by revolt, passion and freedom. By revolt, Camus means to keep the absurd alive by challenging the world anew every second. By Freedom, he means losing oneself in that bottomless certainty, feeling henceforth sufficiently removed from one's own life to increase it and take a broader view of it. By passion, he means being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum.

What he has proposed through absurd and through his subsequent writings, has influenced host of writers and critics across the literary world. Nicola Chiaoromonte lauded Camus' stance on absurd in his essay "*In Memoriam*" on the writer. He said:

"He had succeeded in saying, in his fevered way and in an argument as taut as a bow, why, despite the fury and horror of history, man is an absolute; and he had indicated precisely where, according to him, this absolute lay: in the conscience, even if mute and stilled; in remaining true to one's self even when condemned by the gods to repeat over and over the same vain task."(Bree, 1962, p. 13)

For Camus, the love of life is contained in the happiness of Sisyphus as he witnesses the rolling of the rock down the hill. Though the task is vain but he feels alive because his eyes are towards the height to which he will ascend again. The same feeling of being alive is felt by the absurd hero Meursault when he finds himself one with the "*benign indifference of the Universe*" (Camus, 1946, p.76). It is then that he realizes that he had been happy in his life and will be happy in his death too.

In the story 'The Adulterous Woman', Janine feels it when she finds herself "*weeping with affliction and wonder*" (Camus, 1958, p.10). Though Janine always realized the futility of existence, being married to Marcel and looking after his house mindlessly, it is in the desert when after slipping out of bed late at night, while her husband is asleep, that she realizes the absurd. But as she realizes it, she also comes to understand that she needs the comfort of her husband's presence in her life to find some sense in the living; the urgency to seek life in a World which offers nothing. And so she weeps with wonder.

In 'The Growing Stone', D' Arrast experiences a joy after hurling the stone in glowing hearth (Camus, 1958, p. 65). D'Arrast, a French Engineer, comes to a town called Iguape in Brazil for construction of a bridge. Where he has experienced shame and wrath in Europe, he experiences exile and solitude in Iguape. When his friend Cook has to carry a stone, on his back all the way to the Church through the town because of his promise, D' Arrast takes the stone on his shoulders in between as he wishes to help his friend. But he doesn't proceed to Church and instead goes straight to Cook's hut and hurl the stone in the hearth. By hurling the stone in hearth he experiences a joy for life in solidarity amidst the awareness of absurd.

This feeling of being alive is sensed by Camus himself when he experiences an "*unconquerable summer*" (Camus, 1967, p. 131) in the middle of winter. In the essay "Return to Tipasa", Camus speaks of his return to the ruins of Tipasa where, even after all the war years the humanity has gone through and all the hatred and violence that has seemed to seeped in the lives of people, he discovers a cool wellspring of joy and experiences the beginning of world in a new light. Here he realizes that love of life which had kept him from despairing in absurd.

CONCLUSIONS

Camus rejects the hope of eternal life and is very well aware of the futile burden that an absurd man has to carry till death; a burden from which there is no reprieve but still he is happy to carry it because it gives him an experience of living life fully, without fear and with liberty. Like Sisyphus, who is condemned to rolling stone, where the struggle is his fate but he is happy because his struggle is towards the height and his fate belongs only to him, similarly an absurd man is happy in his struggle too. This struggle is his affirmation of "Being Alive in The Absurd".

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